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Living with Fantasy & Illusion: Some Thoughts Inspired by Poul Anderson's *The Queen of Air and Darkness*

Dale Ziegler

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Abstract

Meditation on archetypes and fantasy rather than a scholarly paper, this piece considers messages about the human longing for the fantastic embodied in Anderson's novel, and the dangers of allowing archetypes to be taken as more than the illusions they actually are. Reproduces several lengthy passages from the novel, in particular the ballad of the ranger Arvid.

Keywords

Anderson, Poul. The Queen of Air and Darkness; Archetypes—Definition; Fantasy—Definition

Living with Fantasy & Illusion

Some Thoughts Inspired by Poul Anderson's The Queen of Air and Darkness

by Dale Ziegler

A.

A work can be approached in many ways for purposes of discussion before a rather specialized group such as this.

It can be examined as a piece of wordscrafting, it can be dovetailed with other of the author's works; it can be illuminated by research in references and sources; it can be compared to a similar body of writing.

I could have, for example, just to mention one, traced for you the figure of the Queen of Air and Darkness. I didn't. Nor did I do any of the other things I mentioned.

So at the outset let me tell you what it is that I propose to talk about.

This paper, which is titled LIVING WITH FANTASY AND ILLUSION, SOME THOUGHTS INSPIRED BY POUL ANDERSON'S THE QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS, is a true child of the night, having been conceived during a moment of wakefulness long before dawn, and most of its ideas having been born in hours that should have been spent in sleep. Not being one of the children of light and joy, it might therefore be considered as something of a minority report to the Mythopoeic Society.

Anderson's ballad of the ranger Arvid, which is embodied in his story, was first brought to my attention with the suggestion that a musical setting of it might be nice to have for music at Mythcon. But music is a daytime consideration for me, and I casually began by searching for a tune that would fit the shape and the sense of eighteen stanzas; one that would sustain interest over that length.

Before long I realized that the ballad was not a free-standing unit, and needed its surroundings to give it both definition and atmosphere. So I read the story, and then went back to a consideration of the musical challenge of the ballad. As so often happens with our days, this one eventually came to a close, and I went to bed. At two o'clock I awoke, haunted, not by music, but by Anderson's story itself. It seemed to me then that herein, perhaps, might lie a sort of message meant somehow for the Mythopoeic Society - a message on living life, living as archetypes, living out illusions, living in the grip of illusion; a message on the drab necessity of coming back always to daily life, of being people.

At this point, for those who haven't read the story, I should briefly and barely recount the tale of "The Queen of Air and Darkness":

II. Synopsis

Mankind has virtually done with Earth and split into countless colonies, peopling planets everywhere, bringing to each that which is most meaningful to them from their past cultures.

On the little world of Roland, with its twin moons and its star Charlemagne, the colonists have been puzzled and disturbed for several generations by ominous reports from dwellers on the outskirts of civilization. Creatures which seem to be the Old Folk of Earth, risen again from so far in space and time, are devoutly believed to inhabit the Outlands, in all their variety of shape and kind, with their mingling of malevolence and indifference to mankind. The chief mischief ascribed to these beings is the stealing of human infants and young children for purposes feared to be sinister. The sophisticated in the cities lend scant credence to any aspect of these tales.

But in an opening scene reminiscent of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" or "The Tempest", we see two of these human children, now in their mid-teens, receiving a newly-stolen baby from their friend Ayoch, a winged, tailed, feathered, yet man-like creature.

We also meet their Queen: Starmother, Snowmaker, Lady Sky; who confers upon her charges an eternal carefree youth, an immortal's playful contempt for their human forebears, and a benevolent environment of sunshine and streams, flowering bowers, and a hierarchy of subservient, endearing if rather grotesque, playmates.

The child they have stolen this time, however, has a mother of rare intelligence, determination and resource. She enlists the aid of Roland's sole private eye, who has long been curious about these reports, and who has a few theories about them. He knows that such a small area cannot have spawned such a profusion of highly developed life forms, and that archeological research has uncovered only the most shadowy hints of any cultural development on the planet. Certainly nothing has been encountered which could be thought of as a "native".

The detective, who has had experience with several types of life forms on other planets, gathers the equipment he requires, and together with the stolen boy's mother, he treks off towards the wilderness.

A stay with the family of an Outland plantation baron, living on the edge of explored territory, provides a closer look at legend, bringing into the story more of the colorful background of myth - myth not from ancient sources and references, but myth alive, right outside the windows.

After this visit the two worlds engage, being neatly joined by the two halves of a lengthy ballad which is begun at the homestead, and which Barbro Cullen, the widow whose child has been taken, completes later for the detective Eric Sherrinford.

Sherrinford's first move is the cue for some exciting action as he captures for a hostage the young Outling lad Mistherd, whom we had met at the story's opening. At this time Barbro sees her boy Jimmy, and runs to him. He vanishes, and she is seemingly swept up into the arms of her dead husband, mounted astride the very horse her father had given her in childhood. With her we enter a world of great beauty and of great comfort, of magic spires and fountains, and the familiar scent of roses.

Barbro's feeling for her dead husband is revived again, and she feels his concern for her; her child, really Jimmy this time, is soon restored, and she is comforted by his well-being. He begs her to remain. The Queen, too, bathes her in acceptance and love: the All Healer, Moonmother. A persuasive mood of wonder and loveliness lulls and envelops us.

Into this idyll Sherrinford lobs a bomb of shattering steel, scattering startled sprites right and left, killing some guardian trolls at the gate. At his thundering advance the enchantments waver and fall apart, for he thrusts out a defensive field against the thought projections of the aliens, the carefully implanted illusions by which they had planned eventually and painlessly to enfold and entrap the planet's human population, and lead them at last to a blissful extinction.

For they were really not, of course, the Old Folk risen again, but, most of them, a two-legged crocogator sort of people, who had retreated upon man's arrival, and launched a program of hypnotic deception and indoctrination, beginning with the children they stole, and supposedly, hopefully spreading little by little throughout the colony of invaders, till all were willingly within their grasp. Sherrinford had, in time, not only saved little Jimmy, but had, in the process, unmasked the conspirators and their conspiracy.

Mistherd must learn that he is not immortal, that it is not given to humankind to live forever, that his destiny must link once more, however prosaically, with that of his own people.

I will let Sherrinford speak his last scene with Barbro in his own words: "...I suppose if Elfland had won, man on Roland would at last - peacefully, even happily - have died away. We live with our archetypes, but can we live in them?

"Stupid of me. I've explained this to so many politicians and scientist and commissioners and Lord knows

what, these past days, I forgot I'd never explained to you. It was a rather vague idea of mine, most of the time we were traveling, and I don't like to discuss ideas prematurely. Now that we've met the Outlings and watched how they work, I do feel sure.

"...In limited measure, ...I've used an archetype throughout my own working life. The rational detective. It hasn't been a conscious pose - much - it's simply been an image which fitted my personality and professional style. But it draws an appropriate response from most people, whether or not they've ever heard of the original. The phenomenon is not uncommon. We meet persons, who, in varying degrees,

suggest Christ or Buddha or the Earth Mother or say, on a less exalted plane, Hamlet or d'Artagnan. Historical, fictional, and mythical, such figures crystallize basic aspects of the human psyche, and when we meet them in our real experience, our reaction goes deeper than consciousness.

"...Man also creates archetypes that are not individuals. The Anima, the Shadow - and, it seems, the Outworld. The world of magic, of glamour - which originally meant enchantment - of half-human beings, some like Ariel and some like Caliban, but each free of mortal frailties and sorrows - therefore, perhaps, a little carelessly cruel, more than a little tricksy; dwellers in dusk and moonlight, not truly gods but obedient to rulers who are enigmatic and powerful enough to be - Yes, our Queen of Air and Darkness knew well what sights to let lonely people see, what illusions to spin around them from time to time, what songs and legends to set going among them. I wonder how much she and her underlings gleaned from human fairy tales, how much they made up themselves, and how much men created all over again, all unwittingly, as the sense of living on the edge of the world entered them.

"...In many ways, ...the outwayer IS back in the Dark Ages. He has few neighbors, hears scanty news from beyond his horizon, toils to survive in a land he only partly understands, that may any night raise unforeseeable disasters against him and is bounded by enormous wildernesses. The machine civilization which brought his ancestors here is frail at best. He could lose it as the Dark Ages nations had lost Greece and Rome, as the whole of Earth seems to have lost it. Let him be worked on, long, strongly, cunningly, by the archetypical Outworld, until he has come to believe in his bones that the magic of the Queen of Air and Darkness is greater than the energy of engines; and first his faith, finally his deeds will follow her. Oh, it wouldn't happen fast. Ideally, it would happen too slowly to be noticed, especially by self-satisfied city people. But when in the end a hinterland gone back to the ancient way turned from them, how could they keep alive?"

Barbro breathed, "She said to me, when their banners flew in the last of our cities, we would rejoice."

"I think we would have, by then, "Sherrinford admitted. "Nevertheless, I believe in choosing one's destiny."

He shook himself, as if casting off a burden. He knocked the dottle from his pipe and stretched, muscle by muscle. "Well," he said, "it isn't going to happen."

And I suppose it didn't happen, that way, there. And it wouldn't happen, that way here. But in a sense, it came to me that night as I lay awake, it has happened here, for century after century.

The figures which haunted humanity on Roland were figures never laid to rest on Earth. They had emerged in man's dim dawn, fragments of longing and fear, drawn from the world around him, and from the world within him; both worlds dangerous, and difficult to understand.

Man slowly grew to see the world he lived in more clearly, and as he controlled it more closely, the spectres from that world retreated. But the world that lived in him proved more difficult to fathom, and generations lengthened into centuries, and centuries and civilizations crowded one upon the other, while the chains binding father and son together in servitude to the past stretched and grew more tenuous, but never loosened their hold.

The Mythopoeic literature reaches in many directions: backward to ancient religious, historical, literary works; on one side to children's fantasy literature, on another side to metaphysical works, and certainly, though not necessarily finally, into science fiction.

Poul Anderson has written widely in this last category, his chronological scope alone ranging from the earliest historic times through countless futures. In all of this one can sense a certain consistency of vision, can piece together an outlook, a way of seeing humanity. It is clear that Anderson considers the aforementioned chain to be an intrinsic ornament of mankind, and fully expects that the ancient inner world of anarchy will accompany men wherever and whenever we find them.

His stories are permeated with compassion for all men; whether they are on his side or not, they are all victims of the human heritage of birth, and they deserve pity, and also admiration for the clever and brave and wise and foolish ways they manage to survive, continuing to conquer worlds without despite the civil strife within.

Most of that which we read in the Mythopoeic Society tells us that myths and legends stand for greater truths. We find that they constitute a way leading us more easily to the understanding of difficult concepts. In themselves, myths and legends are compellingly attractive, and it is easy to love them for their quaintness and charm, for their power to remove us from this world of politics and pollution into far-off worlds where magic is a force of menace or aid, where right is easily discerned, and where it triumphs.

How much congruence is there between those worlds and ours? Are we to accept those values as our own? Are the concepts of right we read about beliefs we are to hold in our heads and our hearts; are they forces which should become active in our lives, influencing our thoughts, our attitudes, our actions? Is this material for daydreaming and wishful thinking; for hero-worship, private or organized?

After all, everything we read puts a frame around the world for us. Everything we read defines the quality of nature, of man, of life. If we see enough of a certain framed view often enough and early enough we can easily come to believe in that sort of picture of the world; to believe that things are that way, or that they should be.

But if on one side of the Mythopoeic coin is the motto, which bears oft repeating: "Myth is real", on the other side of the coin is another motto, which we may too often miss: "Fantasy is illusion".

Anderson's Outlanders live in an enchanted world out of Shakespeare. Even their names are reminiscent: Mistherd sounds like Mustardseed; Morgarel, a wraith-like creature who deals in illusion sounds like Ariel, and the grisly nicor Nagrim is like Caliban.

The stolen human children take on elfin qualities, they live and love freely, out of doors, running naked over hills, piping, and singing strange songs. They flutter past the dwellings of their forebears, a tease and a torment. The Queen has made them immortal, garbed them in garments of eternal spring, given them an environment of friendly beauty and warmth, and her strange creatures for playmates.

But the Queen gave her children illusions of immortality. She instilled in them an unjustified feeling of superiority to their doomed and shackled relations. Although they thought they were the chosen children of a Mother God who loved them, the end result of the beauty and illusion of their lives was that it brought them unknowing, unprotesting, slowly and slyly to their appointed end.

How much of what we see in our world is calculated illusion, intended to lull us unsuspecting to our all unwitting destruction? Can we penetrate the spell cast upon us by deceitful archetypes of acquiescence such as those which reign in the realms of Politics, Advertising, and Entertainment?

But there are nobler endeavors! Men have built their lives around the illusory pursuits not only of Beauty, Truth, and Love, but around the illusion of Adventure - of a mission that must be undertaken: to serve somehow for Good against Evil; to Convert the Heathen; to fight Apathy; to resist Godless Communism.

For most of us who read, these siren songs are not enough to tempt us from our books. We are content to let the heroes we see on the screen or read about do our living for us. As we read of Frodo bearing the burden he so reluctantly accepted, we innocently admire him, but it never occurs to us to think of some burden we have relinquished when time has added to its weight upon our shoulders; when time presses, and we feel that we have set out to do too much. We can be led by the promising gleam of attainment to forget the long climb of Mt. Doom, and that if not the

lives of others, at least their happiness may be dependent upon our persevering to the end of our journey. The happiness of others is sometimes important to our own.

Not every difficulty we encounter, of course, is a springboard to immortality and heroism. In real life, as in fiction, the line between Adventure and I-Want-to-go-Home is defined by the presence of purpose or motivation. If the adventure is encountered purely by chance, and one's choice is predicated upon survival, the only sensible thing is to go home, or at least try to go home.

What crosses one over the line into Adventure is the undertaking of a task, which provides the determination to persevere.

Even though it often happens in stories that a prosaic setting and situation is the jumping-off place for adventure, the protagonist, once launched into his new world, is soon embroiled in a conflict of some sort, and is given an important part to play in averting some disaster, or turning the tide of evil, thereby deferring his wishes to go home to the completion of the adventure.

"The Queen of Air and Darkness" is too brief to include a catalog of physical difficulties thrown in the way of Eric and Barbro to impede their progress, and display their fortitude and ingenuity, but I am sure that in a book-length treatment of the theme there would have been plenty of adventure on the way. As it is, Eric's forethought and experience lead him at first try to select the proper equipment for both the journey into the wilderness and accomplishment of his task.

To most of us it is not given to hear the beautifully clear-cut and obvious calls which ring through the lives of our heroes; the clarion summons which lends meaning and purpose to their exploits, and makes a necessity of their invention. So for us the illusion of a glorious cause, a great adventure, gives a rainbow glow of direction to our lives, arching seemingly toward some golden goal. We might want to set out actively after it, or we might merely choose to look on in complacent contemplation, satisfied that we have seen the true way, and are aligned on the side of right.

The illusion of Adventure is often one we can follow deluded to the end of our days, but there are phantoms more ephemeral, if yet fairer.

The fondest illusion we know in life is Love. Love, which transports us to a land whose skies are never-ending panoramas of passionate sunset splendors, whose air is heavy with jasmine and rose, whose hills are pillows of green carpet lawn, whose winds whisper music, and whose waters are wine.

For the grip of this illusion we are not all to blame. Our bodies betray us, willing or not, into this glowing dream world of unreality, which soon enough fades away, either into indifference, or into something more solid, if not so highly-colored.

But the dream we most stubbornly cling to is that of life itself - even life beyond life, life when life has ended.

The seductiveness of illusion should not blind us to the danger of yielding to it in that we lose what life we have of our own, and become dull; both uninterestingly dull and bluntedly dull; and as ill-suited to our own world as we would be to that other which draws us.

For fantasy remains bearable as long as we are aware that it is fantasy. Our delight would turn to terror if we were confronted some day at Disneyland by a real, demented, bloodthirsty Captain Hook, or if we opened our door one night to see a real Dark Rider, not one of our friends dressed up for a friendly kidnapping. Perhaps this is why a particularly bad nightmare can evoke more of the physical response of sheer terror than anything we can read about or see depicted, or for that matter, more than anything we are likely to encounter in our waking lives. Why should a dream leave us sweating, trembling, our hearts pounding, too terrified to move a muscle, even to shift our eyes, if not that for the duration of the dream we did not know, we were not aware that it was a dream?

Living in his world of illusion, Mistherd was yet able to accept very quickly that it was illusion when Sherrinford showed him: this is because he really didn't know. The illusions we know are unreal, and yet deceive ourselves into accepting, are much harder to let go of, and that in us which is fed by fable fights to the death to retain its sustaining dream.

When we do not like life as it is, and are too weak or ill-equipped or ill-informed to make it what we think it should be or to accept it anyway, we stubbornly and childishly insist that it is some other way; and since it really just isn't any other way, and facts can hardly support our belief, we have almost a full-time job clutching at whatever we can to support us, convincing ourselves that here is evidence.

We cannot be truly happy and at home in any unreal world, and remain sane. Perhaps many people cannot be happy in any world, for though this one, as disappointing and imperfect as it is, is the only one we have, there are plenty of dead-end lifestyles grounded in reality, and more than enough unsatisfactory ways of seeing and relating to the world that is as we have it.

According to Eric Sherrinford, an archetype is nothing mysterious. One essential element is, no doubt just this matter of how a person thinks of the world, how he views other people, how he sees himself. If an archetype exists in each of us, do we contain it, is it just one, predetermined, born in us, which thrusts itself out, more or less, in and through our lives? Do we have a choice as to what or who we will be? If we gave some thought to this, if we examined ourselves, discovered and nurtured our archetypal germ, would we be being true to our truest selves, or would we perhaps be stifling another part of ourselves; would we be yielding to a half self-generated, half-imposed illusion, and, by having ended up pre-programmed, find that we are cut off from the spontaneity of a life lived unself-consciously, of responding to each moment?

The archetypes in us - living through us, us living through them, - can we relax and let them carry us along, free to be ourselves behind them? Perhaps some of us do this already. Perhaps some of us do it too much.

Anderson has provided much stimulus for thought in these few lines of Sherrinford's. Especially for a group conversant with the novels of Charles Williams.

It is rather a shame that "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is so short, in that many of its ideas would bear further development. On the other hand its briefness enhances its emotional and artistic effect. It prevents us from becoming too much aware that we never see the Queen ourselves, permits her to remain an enigmatic and mysterious creature whose nature and fate are never revealed.

The story shows many signs of particularly careful writing. The passages of poetry are well-crafted: songs and singing are mentioned as a subsidiary or even an important part of many stories; Anderson has treated us to several snatches of songs themselves.

His descriptions of the Fairyland part of the planet are more than the bare minimum to set the scene. There is a lavish flora, imaginatively conceived, consistent, which functions charmingly in the story; each planet evocatively named, often to bear a wry resemblance to some earthly cousin - "the shy whiteness of kiss-me-never down in the dales", shiverleaf and firethorn trees. And in and among these we see flitteries darting "on irridescent wings", or a crownbuck.

Our most revealing glimpse of the Queen herself, especially when viewed in retrospect at the conclusion of the tale, is found in the ballad of the ranger Arvid, where she seeks to enchant a mortal man with an enticing web of words. He resists, but returning to his own people, he bears within him the seeds of disaffection with mortality and the mundane. The implications of the ballad are subtle, and it is not surprising that there is some suspicion of the Queen's having had a hand in its making.

To close then, here is this ballad:

THE QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS

Poul Anderson

It was the ranger Arvid
rode homeward through the hills
among the shadowy shiverleafs,
along the chiming rills.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

The night wind whispered around him
with scent of brok and rue.
Both moons rose high above him
and hills aflash with dew.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

And dreaming of that woman
who waited in the sun,
he stopped, amazed by starlight,
and so he was undone.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

For there beneath a barrow
that bulked athwart a moon,
the Outling folk were dancing
in glass and golden shoon.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

The Outling folk were dancing
like water, wind, and fire
to frosty-ringing harpstrings,
and never did they tire.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

To Arvid came she striding
from where she watched the dance,
the Queen of Air and Darkness,
with starlight in her glance.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

With starlight, love, and terror
in her immortal eye,
the Queen of Air and Darkness...
cried softly under sky:

'Light down, you ranger Arvid,
and join the Outling folk.
You need no more be human,
which is a heavy yoke.'

He dared to give her answer:
'I may do naught but run.
A maiden waits me, dreaming
in lands beneath the sun.

'And likewise wait me comrades
and tasks I would not shirk,
for what is ranger Arvid
if he lays down his work?

'So wreak your spells, you Outling,
and cast your wrath on me.
Though maybe you can slay me,
you'll not make me unfree.'

The Queen of Air and Darkness
stood wrapped about with fear
and northlight-flares and beauty
he dared not look too near.

Until she laughed like harp-song
and said to him in scorn:
'I do not need a magic
to make you always mourn.

'I send you home with nothing
except your memory
of moonlight, Outling music,
night breezes, dew, and me.

'And that will run behind you,
a shadow on the sun,
and that will lie beside you
when every day is done.

'In work and play and friendship
your grief will strike you dumb
for thinking what you are - and -
what you might have become.

'Your dull and foolish woman
treat kindly as you can.
Go home now, ranger Arvid,
set free to be a man!'

In flickering and laughter
the Outling folk were gone.
He stood alone by moonlight
and wept until the dawn.
The dance weaves under the firethorn.

(Continued from page 32)

Notes for Osgiliath paper by James D. Allan

1. For all page references H signifies The Hobbit; I, II and III respectively represent the three volumes of The Lord of the Rings; and T. B stands for The Adventures of Tom Bombadil. Page references are first to the hardback and Methuen paperback editions and then, following a slash, to the Ballantine paperback edition.

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